

Washington Association of  
District Employees

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# **New Employee Orientation Package**

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WADE Welcome and  
Orientation for New  
Conservation District  
Employees

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## Introduction

Welcome to the Washington Conservation Partnership. As a new employee for one of Washington's 48 locally led Conservation Districts, you undoubtedly have questions. This package may not answer all of your questions. However, we hope this will give you a base of knowledge that will help guide you to other resources when you have questions.

This handbook was developed as a result of input from other Washington conservation district employees during the 1998 WADE Training Workshop in Ellensburg, Washington. At that workshop, a suggestion was made to make general information available to new district employees to help relieve the pressures, questions, and concerns that many of us experience in our first few years on the job.

We have broken this package into several parts to make it easier to use as a reference book and/or a tutorial about conservation districts. This packet will go into great detail about some things and not others. The reasons for this are numerous, but primarily it is because details about some subjects change from district to district or from region to region.

Please take time to review the entire package in your first year as a new conservation district employee. You may find information here that does not apply to you now, but it may apply in the future.

## Washington Conservation Districts

### Background of Conservation Districts

#### Dustbowl

During the Dustbowl Era of the 1930's, then President Franklin D. Roosevelt saw a need for soil conservation. He pushed Congress to develop a new agency called the Soil Stabilization Service. This agency became the Soil Conservation Service, and more recently, the Natural Resources Conservation Service. To increase the functionality of this new agency, Roosevelt decided local input should be a part of this mix. Out of this, he devised the idea for locally led soil conservation boards. Of course, these boards are now our conservation district boards of supervisors.

Roosevelt went so far as to develop draft legislation (Standard States District Act) for each state so there would be continuity between states and so they would all have the same basic purpose. Roosevelt and Congress informed the states they would not be eligible to receive assistance from the federal Soil Conservation Service unless they had laws that allowed the creation of these boards and local communities were actively forming the boards.

In this way the federal government was able to get local input on which programs would be most locally acceptable. These new boards also facilitated two-way communication between local private landowners and the federal government. The boards were able to identify local soil conservation priorities, and in return informed the local public about new practices that could not only save soil, but could often mean more profitable farming.

#### Washington State

In 1939 the Washington State Legislature created Chapter 89.08 of the Revised Code of Washington. RCW 89.08 created the Washington Conservation Commission and provided for the development and dissolution of conservation districts. It also explained the duties, responsibilities, and powers of the Commission, conservation districts, and district supervisors.

This law has been altered, amended, and changed numerous times since it was created. However, much of the original wording remains because the focus and purpose of local conservation districts has remained the same. The law clearly identifies the need to conserve all renewable natural resources through the voluntary actions of Washington's residents.

RCW 89.08 clearly defines the role conservation districts fill in Washington State. It is the role of conservation districts to provide the state's residents with the tools, resources, and skills necessary to voluntarily conserve the renewable natural resources.

Although conservation districts were first created to address resource conservation in the agricultural community, the State Legislature has broadened their scope over the years. Our state legislators recognize that for issues relating to natural resources, the most effective governmental link to private landowners in Washington State are conservation districts.

## **Funding of conservation districts**

Another unique feature of conservation districts is the fact that districts receive very little non-competitive funding from the state. The funding they do receive, called basic funding, has only recently been provided to districts. This money is available to districts on a dollar-for-locally-earned-dollar basis from the Conservation Commission.

According to RCW 89.08.410, the basic funding amount is limited to a maximum of \$22,500 a year. Due to funding constraints and Commission policy, districts receive a maximum of about \$10,000 a year in basic funding support from the Commission.

Other funds to fulfill the district mission are derived from competitive grant programs, special tax assessments (see RCW 89.08.400), sales of plants and other conservation materials, and donations from local governments and private citizens.

## **Board Roles**

### **The key to success**

Supervisors are the keys to the success of conservation districts. It is through their hard work, determination, and vision that districts are able to identify a resource need, address what work will be necessary to implement a solution, and coordinate the resources to get the job done.

### **The board of supervisors**

Five supervisors govern each conservation district. They serve three year terms without pay. Three supervisors are elected by local district residents through a public election. District elections are held in late winter/early spring each year. The remaining two supervisors are appointed by the Conservation Commission from applications they have received.

Of the three elected supervisors, two must own land or operate a farm. Of the appointed supervisors, one must own land or be a farmer (see RCW 89.08.160).

Supervisors are responsible for identifying resource needs in their district, setting priorities, and coordinating efforts to address the identified issues. Some districts will accomplish much of this work through their employees. Others will complete this work through Natural Resources Conservation Service field office staff and the work of the supervisors themselves. Most districts in Washington have at least one part time employee, while others employ a dozen or more full time employees.

### **Associate supervisors**

Some districts appoint associate supervisors. Associate supervisors assist the district board and may help carry out the policies and programs of the board. Associate supervisors are not eligible to make motions or vote at district meetings.

### **Board responsibilities**

The board of supervisors has very broad responsibilities. The longest part of RCW 89.08 is 89.08.20 Powers and Duties of Supervisors. We recommend you read this section carefully.

## **Employee's Roles**

District employees are responsible for carrying out district policies, programs, and projects as assigned by the board of supervisors. Employees often advise the board on various issues but generally have no role in setting district policy.

The board establishes policy and direction for the district. Employees perform the tasks necessary to accomplish the goals and mission of the district, as directed by the board.

Employees must be able to clearly understand the directions and desires of their board to most effectively carry out their district's program. Employees are expected to work with community leaders, agency staff, and the public in a manner that will reflect positively upon the public trust granted to the district.

Keep your board members informed about your successes, failures, significant communications, and problems. At minimum, you can expect your board will want monthly updates on project accomplishments and setbacks. Most boards will want input from employees on where they feel the board can assist them in accomplishing project tasks.

## **Code of Ethics**

It is important to know that district supervisors, associate supervisors and staff members are considered municipal officers and therefore fall under the Code of Ethics for Municipal Officers (RCW 42.23). We recommend speaking with the Field Operations Manager in your area if you have questions about this.

## **For More Information**

For more information about roles, responsibilities, and procedures, start close to home and work outward from there:

- Talk to your direct supervisor or the designated employee contact supervisor for your district.
- Contact your Field Operations Manager.
- Talk with the Washington Association of Conservation Districts area director for your region, and the nearest Washington Association of District Employees officer or director.

## Laws, Regulations and Procedures for Districts

Laws, regulations and procedures establish sideboards within which your district must operate.

### District Operations

As a local government body, your conservation district must operate according to a wide variety of federal and state laws. Here is a list of a few of the most important ones:

- State Public Disclosure Act (RCW 42.17) – establishes a state policy for the disclosure of public records.
- State Open Public Meetings Act (RCW 42.30) – requires that all meetings of the board be publicly announced; sets limitations on executive sessions.
- State Ethics in Public Service (RCW 42.52) – establishes a single code of ethics for public officers.

### Employment

As an employer, your district must follow several employment-related laws. In other areas, the district is free to establish their own personnel policies and procedures.

- Fair Labor Standards Act (29 USC 201) -- defines the 40-hour work week, covers federal minimum wage requirements, and sets requirements for overtime.
- Federal Occupational Safety and Health Act (29 USC 15) -- requires employers to furnish to employees places and conditions of employment that are free from job safety and health hazards.
- Federal Drug-Free Workplace Act (41 USC 10).
- Federal Civil Rights Act (42 USC 21) – provides for non-discrimination in employment and benefits.
- Federal Age Discrimination Act (29 USC 621) – prohibits arbitrary age discrimination in employment.
- Federal Americans with Disabilities Act (42 USC 12101) – prohibits discrimination based on disability and requires places of public accommodations to be designed, constructed, and altered in compliance with accessibility standards.
- Federal Family and Medical Leave Act (29 CFR Part 825) – the requirements of FMLA applies to all public agencies including conservation districts, however, employees are not covered unless at least 50 employees are employed by the employer within a 75-mile radius.
- State Freedom from Discrimination Act (RCW 49.60) – works to eliminate and prevent discrimination because of race, creed, color, national origin, families with children, sex,

marital status, age, or the presence of any sensory, mental, or physical disability or the use of a trained dog guide or service animal by a disabled person.

- State Sex Discrimination (WAC 162-30) – bars discrimination from employment or benefits based on pregnancy, and bars the practice of refusing to hire a woman because she may become pregnant.
- State Age Discrimination (WAC 162-20) – bars discriminating from public employment based on age.
- State Employment (WAC 162-16) – bars discriminating from employment based on arrests; preemployment inquiries as to arrests are an unfair employment practice.
- State Preemployment Inquiries (WAC 162-12-140) – defines fair and unfair inquiry rules that apply for job application forms, preemployment interviews, or any other type of inquiry made of persons seeking to be employed. The rules do not apply after a person is employed .
- State Industrial Safety and Health (RCW 49.17) – created to maintain, continue, and enhance the industrial safety and health program of the state; it will equal or exceed the standards prescribed by the Federal Occupational Safety and Health Act.
- State Sick Child (RCW 49.12.270) – requires employers to allow an employee to use accrued sick leave to care for a child with a health condition that requires treatment or supervision.

## **Rights**

As an employer or employee, you have certain rights guaranteed by law. For example, you have the right to work in a safe environment. You have the right to not be sexually harassed (this applies to both the employer and the employee). The most important thing to remember is to treat others with dignity and respect, without pre-judging them based on physical appearance or mental or emotional capabilities.

## **Procedures**

Basic district operational procedures are explained in the Conservation District Procedure Manual published by the Washington State Conservation Commission. A copy of the Procedure Manual is available in every conservation district office in Washington.



# Washington State Conservation Commission

## Background and Purpose of the WSCC

The Washington State Conservation Commission is enabled to guide and assist conservation districts under RCW 89.08.

### Mission

The mission of the Washington State Conservation Commission is to protect, conserve and enhance the natural resources of the state by encouraging and supporting the voluntary cooperation of farmers, urban and suburban landowners and resource users.

### The Commission board

There are ten members of the WSCC board. Four members are elected by local landowners. Two members are appointed by the Governor. Four members are designated representatives of various government entities. Five ex-officio members represent various conservation-related entities including: Washington Association of Conservation Districts, Washington State University, Washington Department of Natural Resources, Washington Department of Ecology, Washington Department of Agriculture.

The passage of RCW 89.08 gave authority for the creation and operation of the Washington Conservation Commission (WSCC). The Commission is tasked with assisting local conservation districts with carrying out their locally led conservation programs. In recent years, additional tasks have been assigned to the Commission including administering grant funds to conservation districts for the improvement of water quality.

The WSCC is also tasked with assisting Districts with annual internal audits, and bi-yearly state audits. Much of this work is carried out by the Commission's Field Operations Managers. The FOMs (pronounced foams) provide district supervisors and staff with assistance in procedural matters, marketing, and general district operations. In Olympia, WSCC staff coordinates and administers grants that have been awarded to individual districts by the Commission.

## For More Information

To get more information about the Washington State Conservation Commission:

- Contact your Field Operations Manager.
- Contact the Commission office in Olympia.
- General information is available at <http://conserver.org>.

# Washington Association of Conservation Districts

## Background and Purpose of WACD

### Mission

The largest conservation district partnership in Washington is the Washington Association of Conservation Districts (WACD). WACD is a voluntary non-governmental association to advance the purposes of conservation districts and their constituents by providing leadership, information and representation.

### Officers and Directors

WACD is a not-for-profit corporation governed by 16 officers and directors. The officers and directors are elected from the active conservation district supervisors. There are six regions in Washington State, and each is represented by two area directors. Elections are held annually in area meetings at which a director is elected each year to a two-year term.

Of the remaining four positions, three are elected during the WACD Annual Meeting to two-year terms. The one remaining position is that of past president.

### Representation

WACD represents conservation districts on legislative issues and regional or statewide forums. WACD works to increase the funding for conservation districts and carry out other duties as approved by the voting supervisors who attend the statewide WACD annual meeting.

### Resolutions

The other duties come by way of resolution. A typical resolution will start with one conservation district board identifying a problem or concern and through a passed resolution asks WACD to take corrective action. Once approved by the individual conservation district, the resolution is then presented to conservation district supervisors in their respective WACD area. If the resolution passes at the area meeting it is discussed and voted upon at the WACD annual meeting.

In fact, a local district can generate a resolution that makes it to the national level and becomes an operating policy for the National Association of Conservation Districts. This has happened with several resolutions from Washington State conservation districts.

### Plant Materials Center

WACD also operates the Lynn Brown WACD Plant Materials Center in Bow, Washington. The Plant Materials Center (PMC) was set up to assist conservation districts in the propagation of native plant species for conservation measures. The PMC is also intended to return a profit to the WACD after initial start-up costs and loans are paid off.

## **For More Information**

If you would like more information about the role, responsibilities, or mission of the Washington Association of Conservation Districts:

- Talk to your board supervisors.
- Contact your WACD Area Director or the WACD Executive Director.
- General information is available at <http://wa.nacdnet.org>.

## Washington Association of District Employees

### Background and Purpose of WADE

The Washington Association of District Employees (WADE) was formed to enhance the performance of district employees. WADE's primary activity is a summer training workshop that is usually held in July. The summer training workshop provides employees the opportunity to receive training designed specifically with the CD employee in mind.

#### Mission

WADE exists to enhance communications, promote professional improvement, increase effectiveness of districts and their employees, and to foster a mutual partnership with conservation agencies, organizations, and associations.

#### Voluntary participation

WADE is by no means a union or other employee bargaining entity for employees of Washington conservation districts. Each district employee is employed by a conservation district under that district's individual authority as described in RCW 89.08.210. WADE does not get involved in the employer-employee relationship. WADE develops and delivers training and education opportunities to increase the operational effectiveness of conservation districts. Participation in WADE programs is completely voluntary.

#### Members

WADE membership consists of present and past employees of Washington State conservation districts, present and past employees of the Washington Association of Conservation Districts, and present and past employees of the Washington State Conservation Commission. There are no membership dues. Employees are automatically considered members of the association. Each member of the Association may vote if present at an election.

#### Board

WADE has a directing board of seven officers and directors. The seven officers and directors serve voluntarily to develop training and support programs for various WADE activities, including the annual training workshop. The board consists of the president, vice-president, secretary, treasurer, and three directors at large. Each board member serves a one-year term. Elections are held at the annual WADE Officers and Directors meeting, which usually coincides with the annual WACD meeting and convention.

### For More Information

- Contact one of the seven officers and directors or another conservation district employee for more information on the Washington Association of District Employees.
- General information is available at <http://conserver.org/wade>.

## National Association of Conservation Districts

### Background and Purpose of NACD

Many conservation districts are members of the National Association of Conservation Districts (NACD). NACD serves much of the same function as WACD, only at the national level.

#### Mission

The mission of NACD is “to be an advocate for and to empower the nation’s conservation districts to facilitate the harmonious use of our natural resources.”

The association’s philosophy is that conservation decisions should be made by local people with technical and funding assistance from federal, state and local governments and the private sector. The association’s programs and activities aim to advance the resource conservation cause of local districts and the millions of cooperating landowners and land managers they serve.

#### Organization

The NACD is the non-governmental, non-profit organization that represents nearly 3,000 conservation districts across the nation. NACD was founded by districts and their state associations in 1946, following the Dust Bowl crisis and the creation of a nationwide conservation district system. NACD is financed from several sources, including the voluntary contributions of its member districts and state associations.

NACD enables districts to do collectively what would be difficult or impossible individually. The Association pools district experience and develops national policies on a continuing basis. NACD fills many roles: it maintains relationships with organizations and government agencies; publishes information about districts; works with leaders in agriculture, conservation, environment, education, industry, religion and other fields; and provides services to its districts.

### For More Information

- The Pacific Region Representative for the National Association of Conservation Districts is based in Pullman, Washington. He and/or his staff can assist you with any questions you may have. Ask for Ray Ledgerwood (our very own Energizer Bunny!).
- General information is available at <http://nacdnet.org>.

## **National Conservation District Employees Association**

### **Background and Purpose of NCDEA**

The National Conservation District Employees Association (NCDEA) exists to provide a support network for the employees of the conservation districts that belong to NACD. NCDEA is not a union, but works to improve the capacity and professional abilities of conservation district employees nationwide.

#### **Mission**

The National Conservation District Employees Association exists, “to strengthen and promote the conservation district programs by providing assistance, information, and representation and by supporting the professionalism of conservation district employees”.

#### **Organization**

NCDEA's board of directors identifies regional and nation needs for conservation district employees. Then they work with our conservation partners to develop and/or provide the necessary resources to improve the performance and knowledge base of district employees. NCDEA does not have paid staff so the board and other district employees must carryout the organizations tasks.

NCDEA is working to improve communication, professional development, and representation. This includes developing the district employee e-mail system and implementing a national exchange program, continuing the employees National Award Program, and developing employees understanding of their roles and responsibilities.

### **For More Information**

- Contact an officer or director for the NCDEA to get more information about the National Conservation District Employee Association.

## USDA Natural Resources Conservation Service

### Background and Purpose of NRCS

The Natural Resources Conservation Service (NRCS) is an agency within the United States Department of Agriculture. As explained earlier, the NRCS was born out of the Dustbowl Era of the 1930's. The agency was created to provide technical expertise on how to prevent soil erosion to agricultural producers nationwide.

#### Mission

NRCS's mission is to provide leadership in a partnership effort to help people conserve, improve, and sustain our natural resources and environment.

Today, the NRCS focus is much broader than originally envisioned. They now provide technical assistance on tasks ranging from sediment ponds to stream rehabilitation to roof runoff management. Their customer base has expanded likewise to include all private landowners, local governments, and state agencies.

#### Programs

NRCS has many programs that it administers or provides technical assistance for under the 1996 Farm Bill. These programs include the Environmental Quality Incentives Program (EQIP), Wildlife Habitat Incentives Program (WHIP), and Forestry Incentives Program (FIP) among others.

Conservation districts and the NRCS operate under formal agreements at the national, state and local level. Districts identify resource issues and landowner needs at the local level, and prioritize conservation priorities within the district. NRCS provides much of the needed technical assistance required to solve local conservation issues.

Most districts have found it beneficial to be co-located with a NRCS field office.

### For More Information

- Contact your local NRCS Field Office staff for more information about the Natural Resources Conservation Service or their programs.
- Their website is at <http://www.nrcs.usda.gov>.

## USDA Farm Services Agency

### Background and Purpose of FSA

The Farm Services Agency (FSA) is the financial arm of a partnership between NRCS and FSA. Like the NRCS, the FSA has had several name changes since the agency was created during the Dust Bowl Era. FSA is actually a combination of several agencies that were combined during a massive 1994 reorganization.

#### Mission

FSA supports American farmers through commodity programs, farmer operating and emergency loans, conservation, domestic and overseas food assistance and disaster programs that improve the economic stability of agriculture and the environment.

#### Local Involvement

FSA gets local leadership from a locally elected county committee. The county committee reviews county office operations and makes decisions on how to apply the agencies programs.

#### Programs

FSA has direct and guaranteed loan programs to help farmers who are temporarily unable to obtain private, commercial credit. Farmers who qualify, obtain their credit needs through the use of loan guarantees, where a local agricultural lender makes and services the loan, and FSA guarantees the loan up to a maximum of 90 percent. FSA also has assistance programs for dairy programs and other industry specific areas.

### For More Information

- Your local Farm Services Agency staff can assist you with getting more information on their agency and programs.
- Their website is at <http://www.fsa.usda.gov>.



## Closing Thoughts

### First Days on the Job

Each employee should learn a few things about their office and job during the first few days on the job. Go through the following questions and see if you can answer them easily. If you can't, get an answer as soon as possible

- ◆ Is there a particular way I should answer the telephone?
- ◆ How do I dial out? Any special codes needed to dial long distance?
- ◆ How do I operate the copy machine?
- ◆ How do I operate the facsimile machine?
- ◆ Where should I park my car?
- ◆ Is there a set schedule for lunch and breaks?
- ◆ Where are the office supplies?
- ◆ What exactly is my job?

These may seem like simple-minded questions. However, can you answer them quickly and simply? You may have thought up a few of your own. All of these questions and many others will need to be asked and answered by your co-workers.

### The Necessities

A few items are necessary for you to have or learn during your first few days as a district employee. Each conservation district employee should, have a signed employment contract, know where the district Procedure Manual is located (and have ready access to it), be given or provided access to a current copy of the district's personnel policies

### Relationships

The success or failure of your local conservation district depends heavily on the quality of relationships built between the individuals representing your district and other entities. Take the time to build and maintain strong working relationships with your co-workers, conservation partners, cooperators, and participating agencies.

### Appreciate and Respect Your Board Members

Your board members have volunteered to spend time on district business instead of their family and business interests. That is a big sacrifice for anyone to make. In return, they expect you to do the best possible job for the district. Take time to express your appreciation to them, and listen to their advice and direction.

### Translate

Many board members, cooperators and other agency people are not used to the many acronyms and laws with which the district deals on a daily basis. Try to explain all acronyms and procedures.

## **Provide Context**

It can be quite a shock to climb down off the tractor, drive to the district office and suddenly find yourself embroiled in a vocal debate. When presenting information to your board, one of the best things you can do is provide a brief thumbnail summary before launching into the information that is new to the board. This method gives others time to dredge up older information lurking in their memory. Remember that while you deal with this stuff every day, your board members may not have had the issue in front of them in one or more months. Build a foundation for your information and a much more productive discussion will result.

## **Bring Something to the Table**

One of the most effective tools you can provide to others is your district's long-range plan and prioritization of conservation needs based on the locally led conservation model. When you bring something they find useful to the table, they are more inclined to provide something you need for your district programs.

## **Follow Through**

When you make a commitment or agree to a schedule of tasks, finish it! If you can't, let the affected parties know as soon as possible why you can't. Being known as someone who gets the work done as agreed is a valuable asset in our fast-paced world. Your credibility inspires trust, and that means good things for you and your district. Remember that most districts will measure success by quality versus quantity or any other measure.

## **Ask and Learn**

When you don't understand something, ask for an explanation. Without the explanation, you certainly won't be able to follow the other pieces that depend upon the part you don't understand!

Take advantage of opportunities to learn and increase your capabilities. You become a more valuable employee, and your greater capacity to move the district forward creates success for the entire district movement.

## **Additional Materials**

We have included in this handbook other materials that should be of benefit to you as a new conservation district employee. Chief of these materials is a copy of the conservation district law, RCW 89.08. Every employee should read this law and become familiar with its sections.

Other materials may be included that will assist you in finding answers and becoming more familiar with the world of conservation districts. All of the material found in this handbook should be made specific to each conservation district. Some additional items that may be found in this handbook is a copy of your districts mission and long range plan, a recent newsletter or plant sale brochure.